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– BOOK REVIEW –

Witter, D., and A. Witter. 2026. The Maitai Valley Excavations: An Argillite Adze Quarry in New Zealand. New Zealand Archaeological Association Monograph No. 30.

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Dan and Alison Witter conducted a salvage excavation in the Maitai Valley in 1984 and their results were reported the following year (Witter 1985). Although this report has been available as an online resource through Pouhere Taonga Heritage New Zealand, as is often the case with grey literature in New Zealand archaeology, it is not widely known outside a small subset of the local archaeological community. This new monograph from the New Zealand Archaeological Association (NZAA), the first published since 2013, offers the findings of the Maitai Archaeological Project in book form to a wider audience.

The volume begins with a foreword written by Chris Jennings, who provides some context for this work. At the time of the excavation, Dan was studying for his PhD in Archaeology at the Australian National University which in part focused on stone acquisition, artefact morphology, and reduction strategies in Aboriginal Australian sites in New South Wales. As Jennings points out, this placed him in a unique position to apply not only his skill and experience in excavating and analysing stone working sites to a New Zealand context but also to consider how activities were organised from a regional level right down to identifying individual activities.

The Introduction chapter describes the project, how it came about, and outlines some general objectives of 'salvage archaeology'. The Maitai Archaeological Project was designed to investigate archaeological sites in the footprint of the proposed Maitai Water Reservoir Project located on the northern branch of the Maitai River, approximately 10 km east of Whakatū / Nelson. Argillite from the Nelson Mineral Belt – also known as pakohe - was a popular stone resource used to manufacture adzes that were distributed throughout the country, especially during the early period of Māori occupation (ca. 1200 – 1500 AD).

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Chapter Two provides some background to the study. It offers a general review of the geography and the geological nature of the Nelson region, as well as Nelson's archaeological sequence as understood at the time of the Witters' excavations. The Maitai Valley is described, alongside outlining general principles of adze manufacture in New Zealand and stone technology more broadly. Chapter Three details the field methods. It begins with explaining the investigation strategy followed by a detailed description of the excavation program. The main two sites investigated were the Mill Flat site (Q27/33) and the Maitai Valley site (Q27/35), which was further upstream.

Chapters Four and Five detail the analyses of the stone artefacts. In Chapter Four, the 109 identifiable preforms are subjected to a comprehensive analysis. This covers everything from blank raw material selection to preform manufacture success and failure (or why the preforms were discarded). It incorporates a 'refit' analysis where the data allowed. The chapter concludes with an analysis of hammerstones – the tool required for the main type of flaking seen here. The debitage analysis (Chapter Five) is also divided into sections investigating the debitage flakes as artefacts themselves (including refitting analyses) and then widening the analysis to investigate these flakes in the contexts they were found through a 'workshop floor' analyses. These chapters are notable for their level of detail. The methods are thoroughly described, and their application is explained in practical terms, which allows them to be replicated with other assemblages. These chapters succinctly pull together the analyses into a coherent explanation of the main activities, and how these were performed at the Matai Valley site. While some thought is given to other archaeological features (such as cooking fires), the evidence overwhelmingly points to the primary use of the site was to manufacture adze preforms.

The book then moves to a discussion (Chapter Six) where Dan applies his skill as an experimental knapper (even if 'only to an intermediate level', by his own admission) with a unique way of looking at preforms and stone debitage to the archaeological evidence he was investigating. The results effectively illustrate a staged manufacturing process for the reduction sequence of making adzes, from raw material acquisition through to the eventual removal of near complete tools from site for distribution. It goes so far as assign specific areas of the site where the various stages of this process were undertaken by small groups or individuals (for instance the river for raw material acquisition, one nearby area for main core blank reduction, another for a blank stockpile, another for flake blank reduction and finally a preform finishing area). The opportunity to identify not only individual activities, but also to ascribe the necessary skill levels required to these, is rare when interpreting archaeological data. However, Dan and Alison apply this level of behavioural analysis with a comprehensive analysis of the landscape, successfully painting a picture where the reader can visualise a group of skilled specialists in one of their workshops crafting an adze from an argillite boulder next to the river. This being said, the scale of the adze manufacturing industry which utilised argillite from the Nelson Mineral Belt during the time this site was occupied is never lost on the authors. Comparing how much debitage is generally produced when manufacturing a single preform to the sheer volume of flaked argillite present (they estimate upwards of 3 tonnes) in this single site, which was but one site among many local adze manufacturing areas. In sum, sites such as these along the Maitai River were the locations of large, possibly industrial, scale manufacturing of preform adzes from argillite stone. Tools were manufactured up to a certain point before transported (possibly initially to a base camp nearby) to be both finished and used somewhere else.

The book finishes with an appendix of comprehensive data tables, an addendum 'Maitai after 40 years', and a selection of photographs of Maitai Valley preforms held at Te Papa Museum which were

taken in 2017 before the collection was put into deep storage. These were added to the monograph after the decision was made to publish.

If one were to find a general critique in publishing this work now, it would be perhaps the lack of detailed comment on developments in the field of adze research in New Zealand since the 1980s – whether that is studying the tools themselves, the manufacturing sequence, or the source materials – or indeed a combination of all these. Dan and Alison only had a handful of similar New Zealand based research projects to draw methodological and analytical inspiration from prior to the Maitai River investigations, such as the Southland argillite adze quarry site in Riverton (Leach and Leach 1980) and Helen Leach's "Jigsaw" reconstruction analysis of a southern adze manufacturing site (Leach 1984). While the book concludes with a brief look back over the intervening years since this work was complete (Addendum: Maitai after 40 years) and mention is made of some influential work since the 1980s (especially Dante Bonica and Marriane Turner's work with Tahanga basalt and Chris Jennings' Southland argillite work), this endpiece is more a reflection of the time, offering further context to the investigation and why certain methods and analytical techniques were chosen, rather than a comment on how this work has contributed to our general understanding of adze manufacture in New Zealand.

Theoretical and methodological approaches in archaeology tend to move swiftly and this is an area of research which has expanded remarkably over the past 40 years. Finally, we are beginning to look past the adze as model for an outdated 'culture history' analyses or simply being an object to collect. In this respect, Dan and Alison laid the groundwork well ahead of their time employing a holistic approach to the evidence of adze manufacture (debitage included). The patterns initially identified at the Maitai Valley site have since been described elsewhere across the country. For example, studies of Southland argillite on Colyers Island in Bluff (Jennings 2023), the Tahanga basalt quarry on the Coromandel Peninsula (Turner and Bonica 1994), and greywacke procurement and manufacturing sites in Tāmaki Makaurau (Leach and Davidson 2018), have shown similar uses of the landscape, behavioural patterns, and reduction processes as seen along the Maitai River which enabled adze manufacture on an industrial scale at various locations across the country for centuries.

The Maitai Archaeological Project remains a seminal piece of work 40 years after the report was first produced and the theoretical and analytical approaches employed here remain relevant to adze analyses in New Zealand today. Dan and Alison's eye for detail is a striking theme throughout their Matai Valley analysis, and indeed in their work in the years since. It is this attention to detail and careful consideration of the evidence recovered in its entirety that means this work is still a must-read for those interested in how stone tools were manufactured.

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